

SINGLE PAPER PROPOSAL

AUTHOR NAMES AND AFFILIATIONS:

Pieter De Pauw^a

Liselot Hudders^a

Veroline Cauberghe^a

Charlotte De Kuysscher

a: Ghent University, Department of Communication Sciences

Korte meer 11 – 9000 Ghent – Belgium

Corresponding author: Pieter.DePauw@UGent.be

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DISCLOSING BRAND PLACEMENT TO YOUNG CHILDREN: THE ROLE OF ADVERTISING LITERACY AND ATTITUDE TOWARD THE FORMAT

Public institutions and policy makers increasingly express their concerns about covert marketing practices such as brand placement, in which the commercial content is integrated in the media content. They worry that consumers have difficulties to recognize these practices as advertising and, consequently, to use their advertising literacy to critically reflect on it, ultimately leaving the door wide open for unconscious persuasion. This has led to regulatory initiatives, such as the obligation for TV broadcasters within the EU to warn their audience about the presence of brand placement by means of a visual cue.

In response to these growing concerns and subsequent legislative measures, a small but growing amount of studies have investigated if and how warning cues for brand placement can be effective in preventing consumers to be persuaded without awareness, often through the activation of advertising literacy. All of this research, however, is conducted among an adult population. This is remarkable, given that children are vastly more vulnerable to unconscious persuasion through covert marketing techniques. I.e., as cognitively immature and unexperienced consumers, they have obviously more difficulties than adults to recognize and understand advertising. Furthermore, the advertising that is directed at children usually involves strong emotional or affective appeals, which distracts them from cognitively processing its commercial elements on an elaborate level.

Therefore, the present study examines if a brand placement warning cue will alter young children's susceptibility for advertising effects (here: brand attitude) through activating their advertising literacy. This model also takes into account children's attitude toward the brand placement format, as it is assumed that children may more easily cope with advertising through affective, attitudinal processes rather than through cognitive elaboration. Using a single factor (warning cue versus control condition) between-subject experimental design among 63 children between 7 and 9 years old ($M_{\text{age}} = 8.49$; 51% girls), the results show that warning cues are indeed effective in triggering young children's advertising literacy. This activated advertising literacy, however, does not directly lead to a change in their attitude toward the placed brand. Rather, its effect depends on how children evaluate the brand placement advertising tactic. More specifically, the cue-activated cognitive advertising literacy leads to a more negative attitude toward the advertised brand, but only among children that are less critical toward brand placement. Conversely, when the children are more critical toward the used advertising tactic, their advertising literacy translates into more positive attitudes toward the brand. When advertising literacy is not triggered, critical attitudes toward brand placement will result in a more negative brand attitude. A thorough discussion sheds light on these surprising effect directions. Despite the remarkable findings, this study reveals that the attitude toward the advertising format is a paramount factor in the process of coping with advertising, even for young children.